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Our Cuban Obsession

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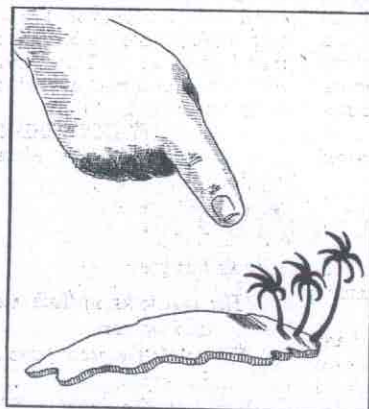
My American Heritage Dictionary defines obsession as a "compulsive preoccupation with a fixed idea . . . often accompanied by symptoms of anxiety; a compulsive, often unreasonable, idea or emotion."

The lexicographers might have added: See U.S. Cuba policy.

The United States is at dangerous loggerheads with some of its key allies—the European Union, Canada and Mexico among them—over (what else?) Cuba. The United States said Thursday it would boycott a World Trade Organization (WTO) panel formed to judge the legality of Washington's embargo of Cuba. At issue is the Helms-Burton Act, passed by Congress nearly a year ago, that provides for the imposition of U.S. penalties against foreign companies doing business in Cuba.

Many experts believe the WTO—a 120-nation agreement covering not just tariffs and quotas but banking rules, the protection of intellectual property and the settlement of international trade disputes—stands to be of particular benefit to the United States.

Now the United States is saying the three-member panel convened to examine the legality of the Cuba sanctions "has no competency to proceed." Washington won't support the inquiry, won't offer a defense



and (presumably) won't consider itself bound by the panel's conclusions.

Why? The Cuban obsession.

The WTO was so important to President Clinton that he put on a full-court press to secure its ratification in 1994. Along with the North American Free Trade Agreement and an expanded General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (under which WTO is subsumed), it was supposed to mark Clinton as a player on the international economic scene.

And the economic significance of Cuba to the United States? Practically nil.

In the days when international Communism loomed as a threat, it made sense for the United States to be chary of Fidel Castro. But Cuba in the late 1990s is a threat to nothing of ours except our ego. There's no international communism interested in establishing a beachhead in Cuba, no government in the hemisphere that has any reason to fear communist expansion from Cuba—nothing. Indeed, we're falling all over ourselves to do business with the biggest communist government on the globe, China, whose human rights violations surpass anything happening in Cuba.

The old rationale was that Castro was so bad—such a threat to his own people and to hemispheric peace—that it was in our interest to bring him down. How? By wrecking the Cuban economy. No trade with the aging dictator, no visits by Americans to Havana. When I was a cigar smoker, I used to marvel at my ability to find choice *Habanas* in every European city, on every Caribbean island, in Canada—everywhere but the United States. But it was unlawful for me to bring back a half-dozen coronas for my personal pleasure. That's obsession.

But the obsession hasn't brought Castro

down. And unwilling to wait for nature to do it for us, we set about trying to rob Castro of his non-U.S. economic ties.

Helms-Burton allows U.S. citizens to sue foreign companies that profit from land seized by Castro—and it already has been invoked to bar officials from some such companies from visiting here. The challengers within the WTO say that while the United States can boycott Cuba all it pleases, it cannot force the rest of the world to buy into its anti-Castro fixation.

My guess is that it's not even Clinton's fixation. And whose might it be? The Miami Cubans, who still harbor thoughts of reclaiming political power in Cuba after Castro is gone, and America's own anti-Communist zealots who have retained their zeal long after its object has disappeared.

One clue as to how little sense America's Cuba policy makes is the rationale Commerce Undersecretary Stuart Eizenstat offered last week: national security. Not only is that disingenuous, but it is also dangerous, inviting, as it does, any other member of WTO to claim national security exemption from any WTO policy it doesn't like.

Besides, there's a much simpler—and infinitely more honest—explanation. It's spelled o-b-s-e-s-s-i-o-n.